

Funny clones: ‘Greek’ comedies on the Roman stage

Matthew Leigh

‘First things first: Diphilus wanted this city to be called Cyrene.’ A line from the prologue to one of the greatest Roman comedies, the *Rudens* of Plautus. The speaker is Arcturus, star and watcher over all human morality, and here it is his job to set out for the theatrical audience the location, the characters, and the basic plot of the drama. In these lines, therefore, the first issue is setting and we can readily imagine Arcturus pointing to the on-stage buildings and to any decorations on the backdrop and at the exits as he makes clear that we find ourselves in the Greek colony of Cyrene, far from the mainland and on the shores of ancient Libya.

The setting of the *Rudens* is indeed one of the play’s most distinctive features and there are further surprises in store: Arcturus may talk of this as the city of Cyrene, but what we see on stage is actually a beach at some distance from any centre of population, where the only two buildings are the house of an elderly Athenian exile and the neighbouring temple of Venus tended to by a priestess. Yet there is something odder still in Arcturus’ phrasing, and that is the statement, not that Plautus, but that *Diphilus* wished the city to be called Cyrene. And if we pause and ask ourselves precisely why Plautus has expressed himself in this way, we may see something of what the theatre meant to the people of Rome in the late third and early second centuries B.C.

New Comedy, Greek and Roman

Diphilus of Sinope was one of the great poets of the form known as New Comedy that came to prominence in Greece in the late fourth and early third centuries B.C. His works survive only in fragments, but our understanding of what New Comedy entailed has been hugely enhanced in the course of the last 100 years by the discovery of a succession of papyri containing very substantial portions of the work of the most famous exponent of the form, Menander.

A runaway success throughout the Greek world, New Comedy also enjoyed a spectacular afterlife throughout its adaptation for the Roman stage. Ancient sources record the names of many authors of Latin comedy in Greek dress (*comoedia palliata*) and the works of two of these – Plautus (c. 254–184 B.C.) and Terence (195–59 B.C.) – survive intact. And what they reveal time and again is what Arcturus’ words here proclaim: they feel not the slightest embarrassment, indeed take positive pride in the fact that their works are but reworkings of the masterpieces of the Greek stage. To state that Diphilus wished the city to be called Cyrene is thus Plautus’ way of acknowledging that the *Rudens* is in essence someone else’s work.

Importing Greek culture to Rome

240 B.C. is a crucial year in the history of culture and the history of empire. For it was in this year that the Roman state wrested control of the very Greek island of Sicily from Carthage and that the Latin poet Livius Andronicus began the practice of performing at the religious festivals of the Roman people tragedies and comedies based on the works of his great Greek predecessors.

In two very different ways – by the pen and by the sword – the Romans announced their entry into the Greek world.

Livius Andronicus is a figure worth concentrating on, for he is also the author of the first known Latin epic, a version of Homer’s *Odyssey* written in the Saturnian metre. He was soon followed by the poet Naevius, who wrote tragedies and comedies and an epic on the war for Sicily called the *Bellum Poenicum*. Another figure perhaps even more important than either of these was Ennius, who composed tragedies, comedies, and satires as well as an epic on the history of Rome from its foundation to his own day – the *Annales* – that replaced the Latin Saturnian with the dactylic hexameter of Homer. Plautus and Terence are therefore only part of a broader process of bringing Greek culture to Rome and what makes them stand out is their apparent specialization in but one form: comedy.

Is this play Greek or Roman?

We have seen how Plautus in the *Rudens* has Arcturus just drop in the acknowledgement that the play was originally the work of Diphilus. Let us now consider a rather more extreme example of the same process. Not all Plautine comedies are as straightforward in stating their models as the *Rudens*. In the *Little Carthaginian*, for instance, there is no clear statement of which Greek author provided the original for the drama. Yet this same play does contain a very striking opening and one which offers important clues for how Greek drama was brought to Rome. The prologue-speaker begins ‘I propose to rehearse the *Achilles* of Aristarchus; I shall take my beginning from that tragedy’ and then, for a line and a half, recites a heraldic proclamation with which that drama probably began. What is going on here? Aristarchus himself was one of the lesser lights of fifth-century Athenian tragedy. Of his *Achilles* we know very little, save that it was adapted for the Roman stage by Ennius. So when the prologue-speaker quotes from the herald of Aristarchus, it is evident that he is in fact quoting the same figure’s words in the work of Ennius. It is also evident that the audience of the *Little Carthaginian* must have known that he was doing this.

Posters and proclamations advertising theatrical performances are not made to last, but surely we must imagine that the publicity for this latest work of Ennius must have proclaimed THE *ACHILLES* OF ENNIUS BASED ON THE *ACHILLES* OF ARISTARCHUS and that essential to the play’s appeal to the Roman audience was that the Latin drama offered them a window onto the culture of the Greeks.

Nor is this all conjecture. For the ancient manuscripts of Terence contain production notes for each of the poet’s works and these must in part reflect some of what the Roman audience was told in advance of their first performance. Consider the following from Terence’s second play, the *Self-Tormentor*:

*THE SELF-TORMENTOR OF TERENCE BEGINS:
ACTED AT THE MEGALESIAN GAMES IN THE
CURULE AEDILESHIP OF L. CORNELIUS LENTU-
LUS, L. VALERIUS FLACCUS. L. AMBIVIVUS TURPIO,
L. ATILIUS PRAENESTINUS ACTED: FLACCUS SLAVE
OF CLAUDIUS PLAYED THE ACCOMPANIMENT:*

UNEVEN FLUTES IN ACT I, THEN TWO RIGHT-HAND FLUTES. IT IS GREEK. BY MENANDER. IT WAS PERFORMED THREE TIMES IN THE CONSULSHIP OF MANIUS IUVENTIUS AND TITUS SEMPRONIUS.

Note the emphasis on the play's Greek origins and the fact that it is based on a work of Menander. That this was also a feature of the publicity for the performance may in turn be inferred from what Terence goes on to say in his prologue: the title of the work is given in its Greek form (*Heauton Timorumenos*), but the poet declines to state either the name of the original or its author because he is confident that the great majority of the audience know this already.

Greek as a treat

So Roman drama was in a fundamental sense also Greek and this was essential to its appeal. The most important historian of this period was the Greek Polybius, once a leading statesman back home in Achaea but a political detainee in Rome for almost 20 years in the 160s and 150s B.C. He takes as his theme the 53 years from 220 to 167 B.C. in which Rome rose from purely regional power to effective domination of the entire mediterranean world, but he also sets out to record how this transformation impacted on the private lives of its citizens.

What emerges is that, just as Roman power became an ever greater reality for the states of the Greek world, so the trappings of Greek culture became an ever more visible presence in the city of Rome. The people who stuffed their houses with the statues and paintings plundered from all over the Greek world also listened to Greek teachers of philosophy and rhetoric and flocked to the theatre to see Greek drama staged. It was, of course, put on in Latin, and the relationship of the Latin work to its Greek original could often be distinctly distant, but the Roman citizen heading home from the theatre had every opportunity to announce that he had just seen, not the *Self-Tormentor* of Terence, but the *Self-Tormentor* of Menander, not the *Rudens* of Plautus, but rather that of Diphilus. What could seem smarter than that?

Matthew Leigh is Professor of Classics at St Anne's College, Oxford, and an expert on Lucan and Roman Comedy.